

Ronald Hutton

*Debates in Stuart History*

Palgrave

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This is a collection of six full-length essays and a conclusion. The subjects Professor Hutton covers include Revisionism and Oliver Cromwell. The essay on Revisionism which opens the book will no doubt generate controversy. In Hutton's view the revisionist re-writing of the seventeenth century failed. Instead of overturning the progressive and revolutionary perceptions of the period, with their origins in the nineteenth century, it instead refocused attention on the same elements that eminent Victorian historians had seen as fundamental: monarchy and parliament and looked at the same divisions Court versus County, and so on; representing not an overturning but a 'more ambitious way of writing nineteenth-century history'. The effect was not to reclaim the period, but to drive it away and make it alien. The point of the rest of the book is to rescue the period from this alienation.

There is a particularly enlightening essay on Charles II: written some twenty years after Hutton originally worked on his seminal biography of the 'merry monarch'. This is approached from the perspective of a biographer, and like much of the book includes a very personal element. This aspect of the work is recognised and well signposted: it is insightful, if at first uncomfortable to historians more used to eliding the self from work. Moreover, it is particularly useful for students working on the way

that historians write and research their histories, as are the explorations of the motivations of writers covering the civil war period. The essay on the Great Civil War is a very useful study of developments in the field since the 1970s in particular and should be a 'must read' for students looking at the historiography of the period.

There is of course some polemic. The essay on Oliver Cromwell is particularly argumentative and there is little doubt that it contains a controversial perspective of Cromwell's religion. The Cromwell of this essay is a hypocrite, and far from being in favour of a tolerant regime, this Oliver was buying time for his own minority views. Cromwell's Godliness was far more in keeping with the New England-way than a progressive toleration. This challenge is just begging to be answered.

The book has a very useful chapter on the new perspectives of Stuart history, particularly the three kingdoms/four nations approach developed in the past two to three decades. Hutton pays due tribute to the major figures in this approach and somewhat underplays his own important contribution. Both *The Restoration a Political History of England and Wales* and *Charles II King of England, Scotland and Ireland* acknowledged the intricacies of the British isles and were published ahead of some of the more clearly acknowledged 'leading' texts.

This is a great and fascinating read, full of insight from a historian involved in so much of the historical controversy and debate that the book covers. It marks a welcome (if no doubt temporary) return to the subject area by one of its most instructive commentators.